

# **Because We Care**

## **Guidelines for Death and Life-Threatening Injury Notification**

**The principles of death notification:**

**In person**

**In time,**

**In pairs,**

**In plain language, and**

**With compassion.**

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## ***DEDICATION AND INTRODUCTION***

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### ***DEDICATION***

We dedicate this information to the family members, friends and co-workers who have lost a loved one, or who have been seriously injured, and to the men and women who will serve survivors and society by carrying out the difficult duty of death or life threatening injury notification.

### ***INTRODUCTION***

The purpose of this information is to help those who must notify survivors of the death or life-threatening injury of a family member or co-worker while at work.

Death notification is acknowledged to be one of the most difficult tasks faced by professionals, because learning of the death of a loved one often is the most traumatic event in a person's life.

The moment of notification is one that most people remember very vividly for the rest of their life – with pain and sometimes anger.

Some survivors hear the news first through the media or a reporter calling, and then have flashbacks to that moment for years. Others tell how they were stunned to hear the person who was killed referred to as "the body" only minutes after the death.

This information suggests ways to notify survivors effectively and sensitively – including tips on what **not** to do or say.

Notification is an important duty. Besides being sensitive, you have to be prepared in case a survivor goes into shock and requires emergency medical treatment.

The principles described here are simple: ***Notification should be done in person, in time, in pairs whenever possible, in plain language, and with compassion.***

## ***DEATH OR LIFE-THREATENING INJURY NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES***

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In the event that an employee dies or experiences a life-threatening injury while at work, or if agency personnel are the first to know of an employee's death or life-threatening injury off duty, the agency should take the responsibility to notify the next of kin and provide as much assistance as possible.

This document contains some of the principles of death and life-threatening injury notification.

### **"IN PERSON"**

Always make death or life-threatening injury notification in person – **not by telephone.**

It is very important to provide the survivor(s) with a human presence or "presence of compassion" during an extremely stressful time. The team members who are present can help if the survivor(s) has a dangerous shock reaction – which is not at all uncommon – and you can help the survivor(s) move through this most difficult moment.

Arrange notification in person even if the survivor(s) lives far away.

Contact a corresponding department representative in the survivor's home area to deliver the notification in person. Other options for contact are the Division of Motor Vehicles Enforcement Section, State Highway Patrol or the local law enforcement agency in the area.

### **"IN TIME" – AND WITH CERTAINTY**

Provide notification as soon as possible – but be absolutely sure that there is positive identification of the victim. Notify next of kin and others who live in the same household, including roommates and unmarried partners.

Too many survivors are devastated by learning of the death or life-threatening injury of a loved one from the media. Mistaken notifications also have caused enormous trauma.

Before the notification, move quickly to gather information.

- A. Confirm the identity of the deceased or injured employee,
- B. Gather details about the circumstances surrounding the death or injury,
- C. Determine any health considerations of the person(s) to be notified,
- D. Determine if assistance from the clergy, friends or neighbors is needed and make the necessary contacts,
- E. Determine which personnel will take part in the notification, and determine if there are personnel who should not take part in the notification, and
- F. Determine if other persons are likely to be present at the notification.

### **"IN PAIRS"**

Always try to have two (2) people present to make the notification.

Ideally, the representative making the notification will be an employee of the victim's workplace or other individuals such as a family doctor, clergy or law enforcement official. A female/male team often is advantageous.

Survivors may experience severe emotional or physical reactions. There may be several survivors present. The team can also support each other before and after the notification.

Take separate vehicles if possible.

The team never knows what they will encounter at the location. One of the team members may need to take a survivor to a hospital while the other remains with the other family members. One team member may be able to stay longer to help contact other family or friends for support. Having two vehicles gives you maximum flexibility.

Plan the notification procedure.

Before making the notification, the team should decide who will speak, what will be said, and how much detail will be provided.

Refreshment arrangements.

Be prepared to contact other team members to bring refreshments (drinks and snacks).

### **"IN PLAIN LANGUAGE"**

You should clearly identify yourselves, present any credentials that you may have and ask to talk with the survivor(s) in private.

Do not make the notification at the doorstep. Be sure you are speaking to the right person. Ask to move inside, and get the survivor(s) seated in the privacy of their home.

Use straight forward and direct language in explaining the reason for the visit.

Survivors are served best by telling them directly what happened. The presence of the team already has alerted them of a problem.

Inform the survivor(s) of the death, speaking slowly and carefully giving any details that are available. Then, calmly and professionally, answer any questions the survivor(s) may have.

Begin by saying, *"I have some very bad news to tell you,"* or a similar statement. This gives the survivor(s) an important moment to prepare for the shocking news. Avoid vague expressions such as, *"Sally was lost"* or *"passed away."* Examples of plain language include: *"Your daughter, Nikki, was in a car accident and she was killed."* *"Your husband, Tom, was shot today and he died."* *"Your father, Fred, had a heart attack at his work place and he died."*

Call the deceased or injured employee by name – rather than *"the body"* or *"he"*.

Patiently answer any questions about the cause of death, the location of the deceased employee, etc. Offer to gather information about questions you could not answer and get back to the survivor(s) when more information is available, and be sure to follow through.

There are few consoling words that survivors find helpful – but it is always appropriate to say, *"I am sorry this happened."*

## **"WITH COMPASSION"**

Your presence and compassion are the most important resources you bring to death notification.

Accept the survivors emotions and your own. It is better to let a tear fall than to appear cold and unfeeling. Never try to "talk survivors out of their grief" or offer false hope. Be careful not to impose your own religious beliefs.

Many survivors have reported later that statements like these were not helpful to them: "*It was God's will,*" "*She led a full life,*" and "*I understand what you are going through*" (unless you, indeed, had a similar experience).

Plan to take time to provide information, support, and direction. Never simply notify and leave.

Do not take a victim's personal items with you at the time of notification.

Survivors often need time, even days, before accepting the victim's belongings. Eventually, survivors will want the victim's belongings but allow them to gauge the time. A victim's belongings should be neatly packaged for delivery before presented to the survivors. Inform survivors how to recover items if they are not in your custody.

Offer support and assistance to the survivor(s):

Survivors bear the burden of inevitable responsibilities. You can help them begin to move through the mourning and grieving process by providing immediate assistance in dealing with the death.

Offer to call a friend or family member who will come to support the survivor(s) -- and stay until the support person arrives.

Offer to help contact others who must be notified (until a support person arrives to help with this duty.)

Survivors may have a hard time remembering what is done and said, so write down the names and phone numbers of all who are contacted and the status. (See Notification and Information Forms "*Survivors Intake Form*")

If applicable, inform the survivor(s) of any chance to view the deceased employee.

Offer transportation to the survivors or representative for identification of the deceased employee, if necessary. Explain the condition of the deceased employee, especially if there is trauma, and any restrictions on contact that may apply if there are forensic concerns.

Viewing the deceased loved one should be the survivors choice. Providing accurate information in advance will help survivors make that decision. Some survivors will choose to see the body immediately, and this should be allowed if possible. (Denying access to see the body is not an act of kindness.)

## **Follow-Up**

Always leave names and phone numbers with the survivor(s) so they can contact you for assistance. (Sample form attached – see Notification and Information "*Agency Notification Representative*")

Plan to make a follow-up contact in person with the survivor(s) the next day.

If the death occurred in another country or state, leave the name and phone number of a contact person at that location.

Most survivors are confused and some might feel abandoned after the initial notification. Many will want clarification or may need more direction on necessary arrangements.

The notification team should be sure they are clear on any follow-up assignments they need to carry out.

## ***DEATH OR LIFE-THREATENING INJURY NOTIFICATION IN THE WORKPLACE***

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Survivors often must be notified at their workplace. Here are several tips to help apply the basic principles to a work place notification:

- Ask to speak to the manager or supervisor, and ask if the person to be notified is available. It is not necessary to divulge any details regarding the purpose of your visit.
- Ask the manager or supervisor to arrange for a private room in which to make the notification.
- Follow the basic notification procedures described herein: in person, in time, in pairs, in plain language, with compassion.
- Allow the survivor time to react and offer your support.
- Transport the survivor to their home, or if necessary, to identify the body. NEVER allow the survivor to drive.
- Let the survivor determine what they wish to tell the manager or supervisor regarding the death. Offer to notify the supervisor if that is what the survivor prefers you to do.

## ***DEATH OR LIFE-THREATENING INJURY NOTIFICATION IN A HOSPITAL SETTING***

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Departmental employees may be called on to be with family members when an accident has happened and/or a death notification is given at a hospital.

Be prepared to assist the family, friends and co-workers following the procedures set out in the previous chapter. Do not leave the loved ones alone. Be sure someone is there to accompany them and assist with their needs.

Follow up with the family/friends the next day.

## ***"DEBRIEFING" FOR NOTIFICATION TEAM AND SUPERVISORS***

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Members of a notification team should meet as soon as possible to debrief the situation:



- Double-check who is responsible for any follow-up tasks to help ease the pain and suffering of the survivor(s).
- Review the notification: what went wrong, what went right, how it could be done better in the future.
- Share personal feelings and emotions of the notification team.
- Death notifications are, without a doubt, stressful and difficult and sometimes very depressing.
- Be frank and honest. Share your concerns with one another. Discuss any feelings team members have about the death and notification. For example, the notification experience may have triggered emotions and stress related to a notifier's own loss of a loved one.
- Support one another.

## ***HOW SURVIVORS RESPOND TO DEATH OR LIFE-THREATENING INJURY NOTIFICATION***

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### **General Information**

#### **Physical Shock:**

Persons learning of the death of a loved one may experience symptoms of shock such as tremors and a sudden decrease in blood pressure.

Shock is a medical emergency – help should be summoned.

Some of the factors that affect stress reactions are:

- The intensity of the event (for example, violent death vs. heart attack);
- The survivor's ability to understand what's happening; and,
- The survivor's equilibrium.

Whenever possible, you should be aware of any available background information about the survivor(s), including medical history.

### **Other general reactions to death notification:**

Even if there is no physical shock response, death notification must be considered a crisis for the survivors. The survivor(s) will have a need to express feelings; a need for calm and reassuring authority; a need for help in determining what happens next; and a need to begin restoring control by making some choices – naming a support person to call, for example, or selecting a funeral home.

These needs can be met through the humane, patient, and non-judgmental approach by you. Allow the survivor(s) to express their grief freely. Take the time to give them adequate information about the death and about official procedures subsequent to the death.

Many survivors, regardless of background, find themselves numb and unable to take the next step. This is where the support person, you, helps the most. Survivors need support persons to help them through the initial crisis.

## ***HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR SURVIVORS***

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The following contains valuable information for the survivors:

Make copies and leave with the survivor(s).

You may wish to contact your local funeral homes, churches, Hospice and other organizations for additional information on coping with the loss of a loved one. Prepare a package of information and leave with the survivors. This will help the process of completing the essential duties and helpful reminders. Make sure to include the "A Guide to Survival" in the package and other informational forms.

# ***A Guide to Survival***

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## **For Family and Friends of the Deceased Employee**

### **Introduction**

Someone you love has died or was killed while at work. It is an understatement to say that your life has been changed. Your anger and pain are deep, and it will take a great deal of hard work and time to recover. You may never feel as if you have “recovered.” However, many persons who have been in your situation learn to “manage their grief.” You will need time, determination, and often the support of a caring listener.

The feelings you experience are likely to be very difficult and foreign for you, but, most likely, they will be similar to what others have felt.

### **The Most Common Feelings of Grief**

#### **Shock**

In the beginning most people feel a profound numbness. Some compare it to “being in a fog.” It may be this fog that allows you to accomplish the necessary arrangements for the funeral and other duties.

#### **Turmoil**

When the fog clears, most people’s emotions fall into turmoil. You may have flashbacks of the moment you were notified of the death, or of the last time you saw your loved one alive. You may dream of your loved one, or believe that he or she will soon “walk through that door.” Part of you will deny that your loved one really is dead.

You will feel intense grief. You may have panic attacks and feel afraid for your life or the lives of other family members. You may be filled with restlessness and unable to concentrate on anything. You may be unable to sleep at night or find it very hard to get out of bed in the morning.

As the reality of death sinks in, depression usually is not far behind. The world may seem to lose its meaning for you. Activities that you once enjoyed may seem like a burden. You may feel as if there is little point in going on, or you may want to withdraw from everyone.

During all of these emotions and phases, you need to keep talking with someone you can trust and with someone who will listen with a non-judgmental ear. It is the only way we know to keep from getting stuck in one of the phases.

#### **Searching for Understanding**

You will probably experience a great need to understand why this tragedy happened. In your search for understanding, you may feel the need to know everything there is to know about what happened, where it happened, and other information.

Seek help from professionals, your church, your friends and/or specialized groups.

#### **Guilt**

Each survivor lives with “what-ifs.” “Why did I let her go home alone?” “What if I had been there with him?” This is a normal reaction. Please remember that no one can predict the future or recreate what might have been. We can’t change the events that took place, and to continue blaming ourselves will only be destructive.

## **Anger**

Anger can be both frightening and motivating. Sometimes it may feel as if anger will overwhelm you. It may be directed at society, the co-workers, family members, or friends. It is not uncommon to be angry at God. Many people feel *guilty* about their anger, but it is a completely normal feeling that many people experience.

Anger may immobilize you or move you to relentless activity. It is a natural reaction to severe loss. With time and support your anger can be managed and may even contribute to helping you gain back some control in your life.

## **Coping with the Reactions of Others**

Each of us is an individual. We like different foods, wear different clothing, and choose unique lifestyles. It stands to reason that, at the most painful time in our lives, we would also grieve in our own way. How we choose to grieve is determined by three things – our personal view of death, how society views death, and our individual personalities.

## **Family**

When the death of a loved one happens to a family, you might expect it to pull the family together. This is not always true. It is not unusual for counselors to see families separate, both physically and emotionally. At this time, communication is very important. Work hard to communicate and express your feelings with your family.

## **Friends**

When you hurt, you turn to people who have always been there, your friends. However, eventually your friends will have to go back to their lives but you may find that you still need support. In fact, many people are uncomfortable about talking about death. They may feel they do not have the right words and may feel hopelessly inadequate. The loss of your loved one probably hit them with a stark of reality. If it happened to you, it could happen to them.

You can add to your circle of friends; other people who have lost loved ones or who are willing to share your experience rather than avoid it.

## **Coping with Holidays**

Holidays can be very difficult. They usually are an accumulation of traditions or customs created by families to be shared with family members. When a member of the family is no longer there to share a cherished tradition, the holiday can become a painful reminder instead of a time of joy.

The first time you celebrate a holiday after a death, it may become a nightmare. Holiday gifts that once were ripped open immediately may sit for days. Thanksgiving is hollow. (What do I have to be thankful for?) New Year’s Day and birthdays, which celebrate another year of life, become reminders of death.

You may find the need to develop new traditions. For some, a trip out of town at holiday-time is beneficial. A birthday can be observed by donating to a charitable organization or doing something that is meaningful to you. There is no rule to follow on

how to “get through” a holiday. You will grieve. Allow yourself to grieve. It is a key part of the healing process.

## **Epilogue**

The rest of your life is the epilogue. The widow of a death victim said recently, “My life has been permanently changed. I don’t know who I am anymore.” This is a common reaction for most survivors.

Your life has changed. You will see things differently now. You may feel irritated by the “little things” in life. Or, incidents that once seemed to be a catastrophe will be only minor aggravations because you have already survived the worst.

*But most survivors slowly heal.* Meaning comes back into their daily activities. They find people to stand by them and give them support. Some find sensitivity for others they never experienced before. Most find joy in the treasured memories of their loved ones. Many join others who want to carry on the vigil for all of those who have died.

## ***RESOURCE MATERIALS***

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**The following pages contain resource items for you to use:**

**1. Survivors Intake Form**

This form should be completed at the time of notification and retained by the notification team.

This form records essential information from survivors. It will help you to comply with their request for assistance.

**2. Information for Survivors**

This form should be completed and left with survivors at the time of notification.

It will help you provide essential information to the survivors.

**3. Agency Representative Information**

This form is to be used to keep a record of representatives from your agency that made the initial notification. A copy of this form should also be given to the family in the event that further assistance is needed.

## Survivor's Intake Form

### Information about survivors and their wishes

Name of survivors: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: Home: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Work: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship to victim: \_\_\_\_\_

Person providing information (if different): \_\_\_\_\_

Name and address of funeral home: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Are there any special items that may have been in the possession of the victim (such as jewelry, wallet, etc.)?

List: \_\_\_\_\_

Persons that were contacted to provide support to the survivors:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Others to be contacted (family members, unmarried partners, roommates, etc.):

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Information for Survivors

You may obtain copies of the death certificate from the funeral home.

You may obtain a copy of the autopsy report from the county medical examiner.

(Name and phone): \_\_\_\_\_

If needed, you may obtain a copy of a police report from the investigating agency.

(Name and phone): \_\_\_\_\_

A representative from the \_\_\_\_\_ (name of agency) will be contacting you and your family to assist you in obtaining necessary benefit information. The name and telephone number of your representative is \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

You may obtain medical records from the hospital or clinic where the victim was transported. \_\_\_\_\_

*Note that it takes varying amounts of time to obtain death certificates, medical records, autopsy and police reports. Ask officials when you can expect them.*

If the deceased employee was a victim of a violent act, survivors may be eligible for assistance from the *NC Victim Assistance Network* for medical, funeral and counseling bills and for loss of wages. They can be reached at 1-800-348-5068.

Name of the notification representative:

\_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_



## **AGENCY NOTIFICATION REPRESENTATIVES**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Telephone No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Telephone No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Pager No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Telephone No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Telephone No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Pager No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone No.: \_\_\_\_\_